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SUBJECT: HEAD OF TOP SAUDI UNIVERSITY LEADS THE DEVELOPMENT
OF SAG'S 25-YEAR PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Classified By: Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: CG John Kincannon and consulate staff met with Dr. Khaled S. Al Sultan, Rector and CEO of King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (KFUPM) on December 17th 2005. Al Sultan discussed current challenges facing the university, the importance of educational exchange, and KFUPM's involvement with SAG's 25-year strategic plan for higher education. The 2-year development of this plan will include extensive studies of the needs of higher education in Saudi Arabia, and result in a 5-year implementation plan. End Summary.

"THE SAUDI UNIVERSITY WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS"

2. (U) KFUPM began as the College of Petroleum and Minerals in 1964, founded to train people to work at Aramco. Long been considered the best university in Saudi Arabia, standards seem to have slipped within the past decade, but it still remains Saudi Arabia's top public university. Over 17,000 men apply each year (no female students are accepted), and 1800 are selected on the basis of their final high school examination, subject tests in the sciences, and an aptitude test.

3. (SBU) "We have no competitors," said Al Sultan. About 1200 students graduate each year, each with 4 to 5 good job offers. Alumni constitute significant proportions of the boards of major organizations - 25 of 38 Aramco VPs graduated from KFUPM, as did 8 of 16 SABIC senior executives. The university offers bachelors of science and master's degrees in sciences, engineering, computer science, industrial management and finance, and environmental design. It has a growing graduate program that includes PhD's in many of these fields.

CHALLENGES IN RECRUITING AND RETAINING FACULTY

4. (C) Attracting top-level Saudi students is easy, but recruiting top international faculty is not. The international competition for faculty is fierce, and external events affect the process. The rise in China's economy for instance, says Al Sultan, significantly hurt KFUPM's English program when many native English teachers were attracted by new opportunities in China. There is also high turnover with the Saudi faculty, who find that teaching at the prestigious university opens up many other opportunities. "We are victims of our own success," he noted.

5. (SBU) The other major challenge identified by Al Sultan is to strengthen KFUPM's position as the leader of higher education in Saudi Arabia. Many KFUPM's decisions in the past have been on the cutting edge of education in Saudi Arabia. They were the first university to introduce an internship component to the course of study, to teach entirely in English, and to link degrees to the needs of the market. Al Sultan wishes to continue to lead the way with new ideas, including distance learning, the development of commercially viable products out of university research, and expanding the community service activities of KFUPM, both in the EP and in Saudi Arabia as a whole.

"STUDENTS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN BUSINESSMEN"

6. (SBU) As someone who studied in the United States, Al Sultan strongly believes in the importance of educational exchange. He encouraged graduate students to go to the US even during the months after 9/11, when many were reluctant to go. He says the US-Saudi relationship is "strengthened not by businessmen but by students." He is happy that Saudi Arabia is investing in sending students to study in the U.S., and said the scholarships pose no threat to KFUPM's ability

to attract top students. Al Sultan stated the importance of having an international perspective in education; there are 60 nationalities on the teaching staff. There are also many foreign students, although most are of Middle Eastern origin.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA: THE NEXT 25 YEARS

17. (C) KFUPM is managing a 2-year project to develop a 25-year strategic plan for higher education in Saudi Arabia. This includes, Al Sultan said, "everything - private education, women's education, everything that is post secondary", although vocational training is considered separate. The US-based firm Charles River Associates are assisting in the development of the plan, and Al Sultan says the process is very participatory. Focus groups will be held with parents, students, and alumni; other universities will be invited to participate. "It's a little sensitive that one university has been chosen to develop the plan for the entire kingdom," said Al Sultan, "but we're trying to assure the other universities that they will be included in the process."

18. (U) The project already has a website: aafaq.kfupm.edu.sa, where the objectives and plans are detailed in both English and Arabic. This website includes calls for bids to complete a range of technical studies of the needs of the higher educational system in Saudi Arabia. These studies will be followed by national and international workshops and conferences. Participants are also welcome to contribute via the internet. The final result will be a detailed implementation plan for the next 5 years, with a mechanism for continued strategic planning for the next 25 years.

BIO NOTE

19. (U) Dr. Khaled Saleh Al Sultan has spent a great deal of time at KFUPM, as a student, professor, and administrator. He was appointed by Royal Decree as the Rector and CEO of KFUPM in May 2003. Al Sultan served as the Deputy Minister for Educational Affairs, at the Ministry of Higher Education in Riyadh from 1998 to 2003. Before that he worked as a professor and department chair of KFUPM's System's Engineering Department. His BS and MS in Systems Engineering are from KFUPM, and he received an MS in Applied Maths and a PhD in Industrial and Operations Engineering from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1990. He is originally from Al Gassim, Saudi Arabia.

(APPROVED KINCANNON)
GFOELLER